

# India: Lalgarh's battle for dignity and justice

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**September 27, 2009 — The following appeared as the editorial in the July 2009 issue of Liberation, the central organ of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) - CPI (ML). Since then, while the paramilitary campaign in Lalgarh has ended, repression against the adivasi (tribal) people of Lalgarh continues, with incidents of rape and violence reported. It must be remembered that the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA) began in Lalgarh after adivasi women were sexually assaulted by police during an anti-Maoist raid; one woman was blinded. The state government of West Bengal [formed by the pro-business Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front] initiated an enquiry that established the assaults had taken place - but only offered some monetary "compensation" to some of the victims, refusing to meet their demand of punishment for, and a public apology by, the police authorities concerned.**

**More recently, in the name of an offensive against "Maoism", a paramilitary offensive has been launched in Bastar in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh. A CPI (ML) statement on this is also below. At the same time, Chhatradhar Mahato, leader of the People's Committee against Police Atrocities, has just been arrested, although he continues to vehemently deny being a Maoist.**

**[Presentation from *Links* (Australia)]**

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A concerted paramilitary campaign is now underway in Lalgarh and surrounding areas in the tribal-dominated western region of West Bengal [1] bordering Jharkhand and Orissa, ostensibly to flush out Maoists and restore the authority of the state. The campaign though being carried out by the state government is being actively guided and sponsored by the Union Home Ministry [of the Indian government]. The Union Home Minister has warned that the operation may take longer than expected and has appealed to political leaders and civil society organisations not to visit Lalgarh while the operation is on. Mamata Banerjee [2] has called for declaring the three districts of West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia a disturbed area. The Union Home Ministry has meanwhile included the CPI (Maoist) in the list of unlawful associations under the recently amended Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram's appeal against civilian visits to Lalgarh, coming apparently after a group of Left Front MPs wrote to the prime minister seeking his personal intervention to this effect, clearly shows that the government wants to keep the operation beyond the purview of public scrutiny. This is as good as an indirect admission about the real nature and purpose of Operation Lalgarh - a brutal war on the adivasis who had been offering such a determined resistance to state repression. In the absence of independent investigations, the actual extent of casualties and injuries inflicted by the ongoing operation is not really known. But hundreds of people have already been forced to flee and there are disturbing reports that the paramilitary forces are forcing local adivasi

youth under duress to locate mines and explosives – under threat that they will be arrested as "Maoists" if they refuse.

Lalgarh had first shot into national prominence in November [2008] when the local adivasis in their thousands revolted against police atrocities following an unsuccessful Maoist mine attack targeting the West Bengal chief minister's cavalcade. The resistance has since continued unabated, and during the recent elections the state had to negotiate with the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA) which is spearheading the resistance, for setting up polling booths outside the resistance area. The state was obviously waiting for an opportune moment and pretext for a crackdown. The opportunity came when Lalgarh recently erupted again against provocations by local Communist Party of India (Marxist) leaders. Maoists made tall claims regarding their leading role in the Lalgarh resistance and dared the state to intervene.

At the heart of it, Lalgarh is a typical adivasi revolt against repression and injustice. The entire history of our anti-colonial struggle is replete with many such instances and the Indian state today has no problem recognising the leaders of those revolts as popular heroes. In the eyes of the oppressed and deprived tribal people the Indian state in all these years has not really changed much and retains many of the colonial era trappings of utter insensitivity and unbridled brutality. But when the inheritors of Birsa Munda, Sidho-Kanu and Tilka Manjhi [3] revolt against this contemporary reality, our post-colonial democratic system knows no other way but to declare a virtual war on these seekers of justice. It should be noted that the allegations of police atrocities made by the PCPA have been found to be true by a senior official of the West Bengal government (Backward Classes Welfare Secretary R.D. Meena) but instead of taking adequate corrective measures as demanded by the PCPA the West Bengal government has only announced meagre compensation of only a few thousand rupees to the 11 women victims of police repression!

For the Indian government and its belligerent home minister, who managed to win the recent election by administratively converting defeat into victory, Lalgarh is a test case to unleash a new pattern of governance in which paramilitary forces will become the custodian of constitutional niceties. There is also the larger political game plan to trap the ruling Left Front of West Bengal in an increasingly repressive role while the Congress party plays the benefactor and monopolises the mask of welfare measures!

For the people of West Bengal, Operation Lalgarh is a political eye-opener. During the recent elections, Mamata Banerjee claimed to champion the cause of the struggles in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh, and the local Trinamool Congress (TMC) says the Maoists need to be politically isolated from the people they are mobilising, even as West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee [4] demands more central forces and Sitaram Yechury [5] asks the prime minister to demonstrate his seriousness in tackling what his government claims to be the biggest threat to internal security! On the one hand, the government spearheads a paramilitary operation, and the MPs seek personal intervention of the prime minister to prevent political leaders from visiting the operation area, and on the other hand the party talks of fighting a political battle against Maoists! If the CPI(M) thinks that all this can be justified by invoking the party-government distinction and that the centre-state or Congress-CPI (M) cooperation in "restoring the authority of the state" in Lalgarh could help check the TMC's advance, it is only deceiving itself.

As for the Maoists, they have only once again demonstrated the incompatibility of their ideas and actions with the needs of any radical people's movement. With their penchant for exclusive and sensational military actions and aversion to the mass political process, they ultimately only produce a dampening and disruptive effect on any powerful people's movement while letting the Mamata Banerjees reap the political benefit of people's struggles and sacrifices.

We join the democratic opinion of the country and the justice-loving people of Lalgarh to demand an immediate end to the paramilitary offensive, withdrawal of paramilitary forces and a negotiated resolution of the conflict through fulfilment of the just demands of the Lalgarh people and quick redressing of all their long-standing grievances.

We also do not support the idea of banning the CPI (Maoist) as a terrorist organisation. The Maoists are anyway an underground organisation and the experience of states like Chhattisgarh and Orissa, where they have been banned for years, clearly shows that the ban has been ineffective from the point of view of checking Maoist military actions. The ban is actually a weapon to terrorise the common people and stifle the democratic voice of protest. The case of Dr. Binayak Sen is a clear instance and for every Binayak Sen case that comes to the limelight, there are always hundreds of lesser-known activists and ordinary men and women whose human rights continue to be brutally trampled upon.

***Victory to Lalgarh's glorious battle for dignity and justice!***

The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation

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## **Halt paramilitary offensive in Chhattisgarh**

**Halt Operation Green Hunt''. War on the people cannot bring peace to Bastar. Disbanding Salwa Judum and ensuring rights of adivasi people is the only road to peace.}}** The paramilitary offensive launched in Bastar by CoBRA [[Commando Battalion for Resolute Action – a central paramilitary force in India.]] battalions along with state police is a matter of grave concern for all those who seek the return of peace in the region. The experience of counter-insurgency offensives in other parts of the country, as well as that of the past few years in Chhattisgarh itself, have clearly shown that **paramilitarycleansing operations'' never bring peace or end militancy. In effect, such operations have invariably spelt a war on the people, with mass-scale violations of human rights, and have been quite ineffective in checking military actions by Maoists or insurgent groups.**

The Indian government, by sponsoring a militaristic offensive in Bastar and backing up the Chhattisgarh government in the patronage of a private militia (the Salwa Judum [6]), is not even heeding the recommendations of the expert committee appointed by the Planning Commission [7]. In its report submitted in early 2008, this committee had explicitly counselled against ineffective militaristic solutions, pointing instead to the need to address the "socio-economic malaise" caused by the state's failure to ensure basic constitutional entitlements to the poorest and most deprived of people.

In a highly irresponsible manner, the [Indian government's] Home Ministry is accompanying its offensive with screaming ads displaying photographs claimed to be victims of **naxalites''** who, the ad claims are "nothing, but cold-blooded murderers". Civilian killings by Maoists are indefensible. But killings of innocents by the state, in order to brand them as extremists in death, is surely a far more heinous offence. The Home Ministry is silent on the numerous "encounters'' in Bastar, where

villagers have identified the victims as innocent adivasis rather than "dreaded naxalites". The Ishrat Jehan [[A 19-year-old young woman, a college student, who along with three other men was shot dead in a reported "encounter" five years ago in Gujarat, branded by Gujarat police as terrorists plotting to kill the Gujarat chief minister. Recently a magisterial enquiry established that she and the other three men were innocent, and that the "encounter" was faked.]] case has emphasised that encounters which are yet to be proved genuine by a judicial enquiry are all too likely to be fake. Are fake encounters not cold-blooded murders? An estimated 2 lakh adivasi people of Bastar have been rendered homeless since the launch of the Salwa Judum offensive in 2005. There have been several charges of rape and looting against leaders of the Salwa Judum. What passes for the "counterinsurgency" operation in Chhattisgarh is clearly nothing but a war on the people.

The only road to peace in Bastar, in this situation, can be for the state and central governments to immediately put an end to the war on the people by private militia (Salwa Judum) and paramilitary; to ensure the return of the displaced adivasis to their villages; and guarantee of their rights to land, livelihood and life.

**Statement issued by CPI (ML) Central Committee, September 20, 2009**

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**P.S.**

\* From <http://links.org.au/node/1276>

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## Footnotes

[1] The Indian state of West Bengal, ruled for the past 30 years by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front. In recent parliamentary elections, the ruling CPI (M) suffered huge reverses.

[2] Leader of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the main ruling-class opposition party in West Bengal, whose coalition with the Congress party in the last parliamentary elections won a landslide victory with the majority of the seats in the state.

[3] Adivasi (tribal) heroes and martyrs of the freedom struggle against British colonialism.

[4] CPI (M) West Bengal chief minister.

[5] CPI (M) politburo member.

[6] <http://www.cgnet.in/N1/hurightspressrelease> for facts on Salwa Judum by a human rights group. There have since been several more damning facts revealed about the Salwa Judum; see [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main42.asp?filename=Ne180709coverstory.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main42.asp?filename=Ne180709coverstory.asp) to read about tribal women who are trying to get a magistrate to register their case in court accusing top leaders of the Salwa Judum of rape.

[7] See [http://planningcommission.gov.in/reports/publications/rep\\_dce.pdf](http://planningcommission.gov.in/reports/publications/rep_dce.pdf).